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Innovative program at six Minneapolis farmers markets helps low-income Minnesotans eat better, supports Minnesota farmers

[MINNEAPOLIS. **July 13, 2011**] Affordable, healthy food is now easier to get for people who buy food with food stamps, thanks to a coordinated effort that allows more farmers markets to accept EBT (electronic benefits transfer) cards. Now people can use EBT cards to buy fruits, vegetables and other healthy food at six Minneapolis farmers markets (up from three last year). The markets are:

- Midtown Farmers Market
- Minneapolis Farmers Market
- Northeast Farmers Market
- West Bank Farmers Markets at Augsburg
- West Bank Farmers Markets at Brian Coyle Community Center
- West Broadway Farmers Market

As an incentive to shop at the markets and encourage people to eat healthier foods, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) and the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support are offering “Market Bucks” coupons, which match the first \$5 in EBT card purchases with an additional \$5 in Market Bucks each market day. That amounts to \$10 of food for just \$5 – a great value in these tight times.

Positive results from last year’s launch of EBT services at the Minneapolis and Northeast Farmers Markets, and increased use of food support dollars at the Midtown Farmers Market were the driving forces behind the decision to expand EBT and Market Bucks this year. At Midtown Farmers Market, the first market in the Twin Cities to accept EBT cards, the number of people using EBT at the market more than doubled and EBT transactions more than tripled over 2009. Six in 10 repeat customers surveyed reported that the Market Bucks program positively affected the amount of fruits and vegetables they ate (46 percent eating “a little more” and 13 percent eating “a lot more”).

“We were really pleased with the results, so we jumped at the opportunity to work with more markets this year and help introduce more people to the healthy foods available to them at farmers markets,” says Dr. Marc Manley, chief prevention officer for Blue Cross. “We’re invested in this effort because we care about the health of all Minnesotans. This work makes the healthy choice the easy choice, so we have a better chance at preventing unnecessary disease due to unhealthy eating.”

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At a time when more than 60 percent of adult Minnesotans are overweight or obese – and at risk for a host of serious diseases and conditions that drive up health care costs – creative approaches to encourage healthy eating are urgently needed.

According to a Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota study, only 15 percent of Minnesota adults eat the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables daily. That means the vast majority of people are falling short of a balanced diet. Access is especially important for EBT recipients, for people living in neighborhoods that lack full-service grocery stores or other sources of fresh produce. EBT at farmers markets and the Market Bucks promotion provides greater access to fruits and vegetables, which can help people achieve or maintain a healthy weight and be well.

“More markets accepting EBT means fewer barriers to healthy eating, and promotions like the Market Bucks program help stretch food support dollars even further during the summer months,” says Gretchen Musicant, Commissioner of Health at the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support.

The EBT and Market Bucks program also helps customers support local farmers and connect with their communities. In 2010, over \$27,000 was spent at area farmers markets through EBT and Market Bucks, circulating federal food support and other resources into the local economy. In addition, farmers markets encourage an understanding of where food comes from and provide ways for people to connect with their neighbors and community.

“EBT and Market Bucks help to create a welcoming environment for everyone at our local farmers markets,” says JoAnne Berkenkamp at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. “Greater participation in farmers markets is good for our local farmers, community and economy.”

Offering EBT and Market Bucks is the result of a unique community partnership among the six farmers markets, Blue Cross, the City of Minneapolis, the Statewide Health Improvement Program of the Minnesota Department of Health, and the Communities Putting Prevention to Work initiative of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Hennepin County and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

The partners also kicked off a promotional campaign aimed at welcoming EBT shoppers to the farmers markets. The campaign features multilingual outreach at the markets and in the community, advertising on the radio and on buses, and signage at markets.

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***Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota**, with headquarters in the St. Paul suburb of Eagan, was chartered in 1933 as Minnesota’s first health plan and continues to carry out its charter mission today: to promote a wider, more economical and timely availability of health services for the people of Minnesota. A nonprofit, taxable organization, Blue Cross is the largest health plan based in Minnesota, covering 2.7 million members in Minnesota and nationally through its health plans or plans administered by its affiliated companies. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, headquartered in Chicago. Go to bluecrossmn.com to learn more about Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota. Each Blue Cross and Blue Shield plan is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.*

***Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP)** works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with an office in Geneva. www.iatp.org*

*The City of **Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support** works to promote health equity in Minneapolis and meet the unique needs of our urban population by providing leadership and fostering partnerships. Funding for the EBT and Market Bucks program is provided by the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support through the Minnesota Department of Health and its Statewide Health Improvement Program and Communities Putting Prevention to Work grants.*

***Hennepin County** is home for about a quarter of Minnesota’s population. The county provides many services, from running one of the nation’s top library systems to providing human services to nearly one in four of the county’s residents.*

*The **Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP)**, an integral part of Minnesota’s nation- leading 2008 health reform law, strives to help Minnesotans lead longer, healthier lives by preventing the chronic disease risk factors of tobacco use and exposure, poor nutrition and physical inactivity. For more information, visit <http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthreform/ship>.*